

MAN FROM THE WRONG TIME-TRACK

by Denis Plimmer

Author of "Men of the Solar Legion," etc.

In midair the gigantic form seemed to stop!



FOR immediate release!
The statement which follows concerns the entire world, and for that reason I, Paul Dicey of Irving Place, New York City, am sending copies of it to the world's leading newspapers. What I have to say herein must be considered

carefully by all who can read, for in it may lie their salvation and the salvation of billions of their descendants yet unborn!

For this is an account of the mysterious visitation of the stranger, Mok; of my meeting with Carlton Jervis, M.D., and of the enormous consequences thereof.

I shall begin with the night of the great storm in mid-September, 1941.

All that day heat hung sultry and ominous over Manhattan, and about ten that night the storm broke—a wild weird electrical fury striking vicious blue tongues of lightning through the black and swollen sky.

I slammed down my window as the driving rain broke against it in vicious inimical waves. Around the four walls of the old rooming-house on Irving Place the wind tore and rattled and clutched and scraped like a vast invisible giant with clawing importunate fingers. For the sake of coolness I had left my door open. Across the hallway was the only other room on the floor, a room at that time unoccupied.

I was studying for my Doctorate in applied psychology and so deep was I in my books that at first I didn't hear footsteps mounting the crazy ancient staircase, so deep that I noticed nothing until a light glowed suddenly in the hall. Looking up, I saw Mrs. Rafferty, my old Irish landlady, emerge from the stairs. She was followed by a stranger. Unlocking the door of the vacant room, she switched on the light within and beckoned the stranger to follow her.

In view of subsequent events, I have always been piqued at the thought that the new lodger did not strike me more vividly at the moment. As it was, in the uncertain light of the hall lamp I perceived only a tall, stooping heavy-set man with an indefinable air of shagginess about him. His back was turned to me the entire time so I had no glimpse of his face. But I did see wide muscular shoulders, long swinging arms, stained and rain-soaked clothing, and twining hair darkly tangled which escaped beneath his hat to cover his thick neck.

I returned to my work with hardly a thought for the newcomer. Minutes passed. The door across the hall closed. A hand touched my shoulder.

It was the first time the cop had cut down a man from another Time-track—it was the first time he'd sent that kind of a corpse to the morgue!

"Mr. Dicey!"

It was my landlady who spoke so timidly and in such low tremulous tones.

"Can I talk to you?" she was pleading.

"Of course, Mrs. Rafferty."

Furtively she locked the door. Her expression was a queer blend of fear and horror. She said:

"Did you see him?"

"Whom?"

"The new roomer?"

I stared at her, puzzled.

"Only from the back, Mrs. Rafferty."

HER anxious eyes watched me.

"Then you didn't see his face?"

I shook my head.

Suddenly she collapsed into an armchair.

"I shouldn't be tryin' to run this place alone, I shouldn't," she moaned. "It's not a woman's task!"

Fiercely she gripped my hand.

"He wouldn't sign the register, Mr. Dicey! He wouldn't hardly speak a word. His English is funny. I can't think what country he's from. I don't know his name. Oh, Lord, I don't know anything about him!"

"Then why did you let him in?"

Mrs. Rafferty stared at the carpet.

"Because I was afraid," she breathed.

"Of what?"

"His face."

"What about it?"

Through Irving Place the wind screamed desolately. The rain washed over the screaming windowpanes.

"It's the face of an animal!"

I stared, saying, "What kind of an animal?"

Mrs. Rafferty sucked in her breath.

"I don't know, Mr. Dicey. Some kind that don't know kindness nor gentleness, some kind that does things quiet and secret, that does them at night!"

To my instant suggestion that she have a policeman evict this obviously undesirable tenant, the old lady demurred. After all, she might be mistaken in her judgment and Lord knew she wouldn't turn a dog out into such a night as this . . .

"Did he pay you anything in advance?"

Mrs. Rafferty displayed a crushed five-dollar bill bunched up tightly in her palm.

"Well," I persisted, not having much desire to share a lonely top-floor with so bizarre a creature, "how would it be, Mrs. Rafferty, if I went in and

saw him? Maybe I could form an opinion of my own."

"Oh, don't, Mr. Dicey," she begged. "Please, don't! There's something about him tonight that warns me to leave him alone! I said he had a face like an animal. Well, tonight the animal's come far, he's hungry and tired, his temper is short! Let him alone, Mr. Dicey, let him alone!"

But by this time my curiosity was afire. I had already started for the door when, distant and faint, a shrill stabbing scream soared from the rainy street.

"Eileen!" Mrs. Rafferty gasped. "That's Eileen's voice!"

I dashed to the window and threw it up, leaning far out into the stormy night. What I saw drove me back and, followed closely by Mrs. Rafferty, I dashed down the shaky staircase. When we arrived in the street less than a minute later, Eileen Rafferty and a little rain-coated knot of passers-by were bending over a stricken form.

Eileen was my landlady's granddaughter.

"What is it, child?" cried the old lady.

The rain-drenched girl indicated the huddled figure on the pavement.

"It's Delia," she explained in a quivering tone of raw fright. "I think her throat's cut!"

I bent closer to look. Delia was the colored maid of the house. From her sepia throat a dark river of blood still poured, gradually mingling with the dancing rain.

"She'd left the house through the cellar twenty minutes ago," Eileen was narrating. "We'd given her an advance on her salary. I think she was going to buy some shoes. She must have been caught in the cellar entrance. Afterwards, she managed to stagger out this far."

MRS. RAFFERTY said, "But why didn't we hear her scream?"

Eileen shook her head.

"All the doors and windows were shut, gran," she replied. "The storm was raisin' such a howl you couldn't have heard an army passin'. Then the bell rang, remember, and you took the new fellow upstairs to show him the room."

"Ah yes," I said. "The new lodger. I'm going to talk to him. Eileen, get the police."

And leaving the two women I hurried back up the stairs and knocked on the stranger's door. I heard a grunt, pushed the door open, and entered

the room.

The new lodger sat with his back to me. His shaggy head drooped in his hands. Carelessly in the center of the floor lay his damp coat and hat. In one corner, muddied shoes and socks made a grotesque heap.

"Pardon me," I said.

For a moment the drooping figure remained still. Then—slowly—the head swung around. I choked back a cry of terror. The face was infinitely more horrible than Mrs. Rafferty had described it. Although basically feature for feature it was human, its expression of eyes and mouth was that of a wild, hungry man-driven ape, resting from pursuers in a cave under a desolate hill.

For a space we stared at each other stupidly. Several times the stranger opened his great maw of a mouth inarticulately. Finally:

"You want—something?"

The words were uttered with difficulty. The voice, as if unused to human speech, grated rustily.

"Yes," I replied. "Mrs. Rafferty tells me that you failed to sign her register."

Under their shadowy brows the harassed eyes roved about the room helplessly.

"Cannot—write," the creature muttered finally.

"You haven't been taught to write?"

"Nobody write. Forgot—long ago. Five hundreds of—years."

"Your people haven't been able to write for five-hundred years? Why?"

The monster stared at me. In its eyes a tiny red flame flickered, the same flame which glows in the eyes of a jungle beast goaded into a trap by its enemies.

"Only priests write," he said finally. "Why others—learn?"

From what country did the creature come? He shook his head. And his name?

"Mok."

"What's your other name?"

The response to this was unexpected. With lightning speed Mok heaved his giant bulk from the chair. Hands swinging ape-fashion, eyes red with rage, he tottered towards me.

"Tired," he bellowed, towering above my head. "Go! Sleep! Tired! Sleep! Sleep! See?"

Before this onslaught I fled to the hallway. The door slammed. A metallic fumbling within was accompanied by heavy breathing. The lock clicked. Something told me that locks were strange affairs

to this outlandish animal.

"SLEEP!"

The word welled up within the room, spiraled through the house. Another grunt, and the bed groaned as that prodigious body fell upon it. Suddenly I realized that the thing called Mok had been unbelievably exhausted.

Downstairs the two women were pallid and trembling. Mrs. Rafferty, huddled in an armchair, was staring white-faced at Eileen. Delia had just been taken to the morgue. I told them of my experience.

WHEN I had done, Mrs. Rafferty extended her hand. In it still lay the five-dollar bill.

"Look at it, Mr. Dicey!" Eileen whispered.

Wonderingly I unfolded the note, smoothing out the grimy creases. Of a sudden, nausea rose within me.

The bill's upper left-hand corner was blood-soaked.

For a while the room was heavy with silence. I said:

"Eileen, did you give Delia a five-dollar bill?"

Eileen nodded dumbly.

"This five-dollar bill?"

"I don't know. I—I can't be sure."

I turned to the door, saying, "I'm going to take this to the police."

Instantly Mrs. Rafferty clutched my arm.

"You can't, Mr. Dicey," she begged. "I won't let you!"

"But this is brutal murder. That thing upstairs may be a homicidal maniac. God knows he looks it!"

Mrs. Rafferty sobbed.

"I don't care. I've got the reputation of my house to keep. I can't afford to involve one of my lodgers in a murder case. Not unless I'm sure he's guilty. If the police are good for anything, they'll get him some other way. This can't be the *only* clue!"

Slowly I turned back. Although I hated the idea of sharing a lonely top-floor with a possible criminal, I appreciated Mrs. Rafferty's viewpoint.

"All right," I conceded. "We'll say nothing—yet."

So did I leave the two terrified women.

The next day I passed at the university. On my return that evening I found my landlady seated quietly in her basement parlor. What of the new

lodger?

"I haven't set eyes on him," Mrs. Rafferty replied. "What sort of weird animal he is I don't know, but he has no regular job, and he seems satisfied to sit in his room all day alone. He hasn't even been out to eat. I've been watching for him, believe me!"

The main entrance to the old building lay just outside Mrs. Rafferty's sub-sidewalk window. My eye wandered to it and when she finished speaking I put my finger to my lips. Just outside, the thing called Mok was slowly descending the steps. As we watched, he disappeared down the darkening street.

"That's the first breath of air he's had all day, so help me!" the old landlady whispered. We sat there in the gathering dusk for a quarter of an hour until Mok returned, shambling down the street and into the house. We heard him climbing the stairs.

I sat there a few moments longer. Then I went to my room.

The next three hours passed in study. I have fortunately taught myself concentration but, as the clock checked off the minutes, unbidden thoughts kept scattering through my brain. I thought of Delia lying on the gleaming pavement with her throat gaping redly, of Eileen's tormented face, and of the grim lodger a few feet down the hall. And I fell to examining his strange remarks, to analyzing them, to attempting some sort of a coherent integration of them.

Apparently he was unfamiliar with America, had come a long distance, was poor and exhausted. The land he came from was priest-ridden and during the past five hundred years illiteracy had been the rule. The stranger was white. For a while I considered the strange rumors of vanished white races said to be hidden away in the hearts of Asia and Africa. Even these hardly seemed to fit the case. Besides, they smacked too much of travelers' tales to elicit much belief from me. In the final analysis, his land of origin sounded much like Europe before the year One-thousand. But it certainly resembled no modern country that I had ever heard of.

Instinct suddenly made me look up. In my doorway was Mok!

THE sight of that huge bulk of bestial life sent a chill through my body. Striving to hide my terror, I said:

"What is it, Mok?"

Slowly he lifted his hand. From the hairy paw dangled an absurd piece of gaily-spotted material. A man's bow-tie.

Mok gulped. His cruel face underwent an odd change which I interpreted as an apologetic grin. He held the tie towards me.

"You fix—yes?"

For a moment I was speechless. Then it dawned upon me that he had in some way acquired a bow-tie and would now like to wear it as he had seen others do.

Threading the garish thing through his collar, I tied it in a rakish butterfly knot. The effect was grotesque. The spectacle of that ugly simian face crowning the ridiculous little splash of colored cloth made me chuckle in spite of my fear. I held up a mirror before the monster. Wonderingly, he studied his reflection.

Then from out that muscled cavernous throat great laughter welled. With thick and clumsy fingers he touched the bow. Then turning to me he reached forth his hand. At first I started back. Then I stopped. The hand was affectionately stroking my hair.

Mok was pleased!

"Where you come from," said I, "don't they have bow-ties?"

He shook his head.

"What do you live in?" I pursued hopefully.

"Hut. Hut from—big—stones."

"How long have you lived in these huts?"

Slowly through the tortuous labyrinth of Mok's intelligence my words filtered.

"Always," he answered finally. "Since big war."

"What war?"

"War of giants—long ago!"

Again his fingers strayed to the tie beneath his chin. Again the happy smile crinkled his face. With a final pat on my head, he ambled back to his room.

For a while I pondered this new facet, a facet showing childlike vanity quite touching and distinctly appealing. It seemed hard to picture this great grinning thing slitting Delia's ebony throat. I continued my speculations concerning the land of his birth. A land in which bow-ties were unknown, where many years ago there had been a war. Something in the way he mentioned this made me feel that it had occurred generations back, long before Mok or his father or his father's father had been born. He referred to it much as moderns refer to the discovery of America, as an event of

antiquity, almost a milestone of tradition.

I was just preparing for bed when Mrs. Rafferty knocked softly. I admitted her. As on the previous night, she locked the door.

"Mr. Dicey," she whispered "I don't feel right about letting you sleep up here so near to him."

Remembering the incident of the tie, I smiled.

"He never killed Delia, Mrs. Rafferty. He's too good-natured."

She compressed her lips. Her eyes held mine.

"The body of an old man has been found behind a signboard in a vacant lot three blocks away. Mr. Dicey, his neck was broke . . ."

Suddenly I went cold.

"Who was he?"

Mrs. Rafferty shook her head.

"No one I ever saw. A nice-looking weak little old man. His poor thin neck was all twisted like a dead chicken's. It was horrible! And the queer thing was"—she lowered her voice—"that he was fully dressed except for one thing. *He had no tie!*" She unlocked the door. "You've been warned, sir. Bolt yourself in tonight. I'm going to!"

Before I could speak, she was gone. I could hear her scurrying down the dark stairs.

DIGGING my nails into the palms of my hands, I fought to keep my head. The ghastly picture was bright in my brain of Mok trailing the little old man, getting him into a dark garbage-strewn lot, and wringing his neck—for a gay piece of cloth!

Suddenly I saw how in character the murder was. It had elements of the bizarre, the horrible, the grotesque. A useless senseless slaughter for a thing of adornment, but it was right. . . . It was what Mok would do!

I jumped to my feet. A sound had reached me—the sound of a nearby door slamming, of heavy feet descending the stairs. How long I stood there frozen I don't know, but the blood surged in my veins at the sound of a low cry from the depths of the building, the cry of a woman in mortal terror. With a single leap I was through the door. As I descended the stairs, the low cry was repeated. My flying feet drowned it out. Panting, I reached Mrs. Rafferty's door.

As I did so, it flew open with a deafening crash. With express-train speed a giant figure shot out, starting up the stairs in great animal-like hops. I ran into the room. Mrs. Rafferty, chalk-white and shaking, cowered in the corner.

"I was eating a piece of bread," she gasped. "He knocked me down and took it from me. He was hungry!"

A burly policeman attracted by the screams entered. Briefly I explained the situation. Together we started up the stairs. Halfway up the officer shouted to Mok to surrender. The answer was violent. A light chair spun down the stairwell, splintering and crashing. We dodged. The missile hurtled by harmlessly. Mingled with the stamping of feet, we heard Mok's mumbled incoherencies. The bullet-like crack of a slammed door echoed.

A few more steps carried us to the top floor. Mok's door faced us. Within the creature panted heavily.

"Mok," I shouted, "come out!"

The only reply was a guttural monosyllable.

The policeman beat upon the thin panel of the door with his nightstick.

"Open up!"

Drawing his pistol, he sent two slugs tearing through the flimsy lock. A guttering howl of pain arose. The door fell open. Across the room Mok was clambering through the window. We rushed him but he was quick. Swinging out onto a fire-ladder, he mounted to the roof. Cursing, the patrolman followed, I at his heels. Striving not to look down at the distant street, I climbed the rusted rungs and swung myself over the lip of the roof. A gigantic moonlit form loped across its tarred surface, thrusting the sturdy patrolman aside as if he had been a child.

With a single clean leap Mok gained the high coping. Barely eight feet separated the top of Mrs. Rafferty's house from the roof of a neighboring building. Tensing his iron muscles, Mok launched himself into dizzy space. A straight arrow of flame from the revolver's mouth split the darkness. In midair the gigantic form seemed to stop, hanging for a breathless instant on the jet bosom of Night.

Then with a piteous animal-like cry, he fell sprawling and clutching through the empty air. The policeman and I leaned over the roof's rim just as the body struck. It bounced on the hard sidewalk, lurched, and landed scarecrow-postured across the curb. Even as we watched, the dark shadows of the curious began to encircle the body like jackals about a slain tiger.

When we reached the street, a pale slender man was just rising from a scrutiny of the remains of Mok!

"My name is Jervis, officer," he said quietly. "I'm a doctor. This—man—is dead."

There was something strange in the hesitation before *man*. The doctor noted my look of inquiry and explained gravely:

"I say *man* for want of a more apt word."

We stared at the body, then with a common accord leaned closer.

For something was happening to it!

NEVER shall I be able adequately to describe what followed. As we watched a miracle took place. In swift metamorphoses the brutish face of the dead Mok was changing, growing younger. The beard lightened and disappeared, the heavy lines around the eyes melted, the rugged contours of the jaw softened. Before us was the face of youth. Simultaneously the huge body appeared slimmer, almost—adolescent . . .

Beneath our fascinated eyes the process continued inexorably. Young manhood yielded to boyishness, boyishness to childhood, with a corresponding change in the bulk beneath the clothes. With a lightning movement the doctor tore the already loose shirt aside, exposing the frail delicacy of a youngster's body.

And still the alteration proceeded until in the cold light of the street lamp the corpse of a baby lay before us. Even that diminished. Teeth vanished, hair; muscular hands became pudgy and dimpled.

Tinier and tinier grew the corpse at our feet. Feverishly the doctor ripped clothing aside to watch this wonder. Suddenly the baby's body curled, knees drawn up, hands folded inward, head contracted toward the breast. Before our eyes extremities lost shape; hands, feet, and head were engulfed in a vague roundness. Suddenly before us lay a tiny lump of indeterminate flesh, cushioned on the discarded clothing of the giant. The flesh dwindled to the size and shape of a large pearl. That was replaced by a glinting jewel of moisture which vanished before our awestruck gaze. Now nothing remained before us—nothing but the crumpled outline of garments which once had clothed the savage stranger.

We had seen the mystic process of birth—reversed!

"Where is he?" the dazed policeman muttered.

Jervis looked up, smiling faintly.

"Somewhere in Time, officer," was all he said.

The officer bent over. Gingerly he gathered up the heap of worn clothes.

"What are you going to do with those?" I asked.

He grinned sheepishly.

"Damned if I know," he responded. "If I take 'em to the morgue, they'll say I'm crazy. If I take 'em to headquarters, they'll say I'm crazy. Any way you look at it, somebody'll say I'm crazy!" He shook his head. "Maybe I am."

"Here's my card," said Jervis. "If you need any help in your dilemma, just give me a ring." He retrieved a small object from the pavement. "And here's final evidence that you shot a man and not a ghost."

His extended hand held a piece of metal.

"My bullet!" exclaimed the policeman.

"And," Jervis concluded, "flattened on one side as all bullets are when they strike bone. Goodnight."

Mumbling to himself, the patrolman wandered down the street, the heap of discarded clothes cradled in his brawny arms.

I was anxious to discuss the whole affair, so I invited Jervis up to my room. A few minutes later, seated in my armchair, he was intently listening to my narration.

When I was through, he wrinkled his brow.

"You say, Mr. Dicey," he mused, "that Mok came from some land once ravaged by war in which for five-hundred years literacy had been a monopoly of the priesthood, in which the inhabitants lived in stone huts and were unfamiliar with bow-ties or locks, and whose basic impulses, unscreened by any civilized veneer, made them casual murderers?"

"And," I reminded him, "a country of white men."

He nodded.

"What conclusions do you draw?" he asked.

I SAID, "Well, doctor, I know of no modern nation which would fit those specifications, do you?"

He shook his head.

"I can only think of the Dark Ages," I went on. "The British tribes for example lived in stone huts, they certainly wore no bow-ties, they were notoriously brutal in their attitude toward human life, they were ruled by a weird kind of priesthood, the Druids, they left few written remains, and they experienced wars of one kind or another almost

incessantly. Of course I'd never say it in public, but could it be possible—philosophers say that all Time exists simultaneously—that somehow Mok was an ancient Briton who by design or accident strayed into the wrong time-track and found himself in the 20th century? Then when he died, his body, following a natural course, grew younger, became embryonic, resolved itself into the seed of life, and finally vanished back into its own period?"

My words sounded crazy. Jervis bit his lip.

"Mr. Dicey, anything is possible, and certainly your hypothesis seems to fit the case. One detail alone rings false! The language spoken by the ancient Britons, the pre-Beowulf tongue, had little connection with modern English. I should think it unlikely that Mok, therefore, could have learned even as much comprehensible language as he did during his brief stay in our century."

I asked the doctor for his own solution.

"I think," he began, "that your time speculation was essentially right. Mok *did* lose himself on the wrong time-track. But he did not come from the past!"

I put the obvious question.

"Go over the facts again," said Jervis. "A certain land, say America, is devastated by war. Civilization is destroyed. Those who survive must live like savages in caves or huts. Learning dies, culture dies, the spoken word almost atrophies. However, modern English in a crudely abbreviated form still remains the basis for such conversation as is needed. As always in a primitive society, a learned circle springs up, possibly a circle numbering the few scientists and scholars left alive, and in their hands learning, a precarious flame, is kept feebly alight. But these men are in the minority, and in order to preserve their safety they call themselves priests and pass their knowledge down from generation to generation. Five hundred years later bow-ties are forgotten and English has

been reduced to a scattering of vital nouns and verbs. *Sleep, tired, hungry, hot, cold, run, fight, die*, and so on. Then perhaps one of the priesthood gets to work on the problem of Time. By a miracle he manages to crash through the veil separating age from age, and for the sake of experiment he sends Mok out and down the years as a courier. If all Time exists simultaneously on different levels, then Caesar's Rome and Charlemagne's France, Elizabeth's England and Lincoln's America are all still active, still going through their endless destined round of events like so many records on an automatic phonograph. And if the past coexists with the present, what follows?"

"That the future does also?"

Jervis nodded, saying:

"I believe that Mok was an emissary from the Future. Through him you and I are privileged to know what the Future may be like, a time of bestiality and savagery where throats are cut and learning hides behind the walls of the temple. And this is to be brought about by some vast and devastating war, a war destroying all decency and all faith in God or man. Mr. Dicey, we stand on the threshold of this disaster. Perhaps we have been chosen as prophets for our time. Perhaps we can revise the Future and save mankind from annihilation. But for us the fight will be bitter. Two against the forces of darkness abroad in the world today. Are we partners, Mr. Dicey?"

He had offered a lean nicotine-stained hand. I grasped it. For I had found a friend.

This brings my share in the world's warning to a close. Humanity now has its chance. The choice lies fairly in our hands. Dr. Jervis and I have done our best. Gentlemen, the rest is up to you!

Signed Paul Dicey, A.B., A.M.

Signed Carlton Jervis, M.D. (*Witness*)

THE END